DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 135 140 EC 092 968

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TITLE The Use of Parent Input in Program Evaluation: One Parameter in Day Cares Current Crisis.
PUB DATE Aug 76
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the International Scientific Conference of IPLD (3rd, Montreal, Canada, August 9-13, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrative Problems; Curriculum Problems; *Day Care Services; *Early Childhood Education; *Parent Participation; Program Evaluation

ABSTRACT

Analyzed are five problem areas hampering the provision of qualtiy day care services to preschool children. The five areas are seen to include definitional problems (including confusion over funding source requirements) lack of program evaluation data, noncontinuity of programing, curriculum difficulties, and underutilization of parent input. Cited is the case of a Montessori program stressing parent participation. The authors suggest that the problems faced by day care personnel are similar to those encountered by people working in the area of learning disability. (CL)

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THE USE OF PARENT INPUT IN PROGRAM EVALUATION: ONE PARAMETER IN DAY CARE'S CURRENT CRISIS*

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Presented at IFID Conference
Montreal, Canada
August, 1976

*We would like to thank Kevin Walsh for his critical reading and comments which were helpful in aiding us develop our discussion. Part of this paper deals with an aspect of parent input and to some extent is based on a paper submitted for publication by Deitchman, Newman and Walsh (1976).

EC092968

THE USE OF PARENT INPUT IN PROGRAM EVALUATION: ONE PARAMETER IN DAY CARES CURRENT CRISIS

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There are a variety of programs geared specifically for the learning disabled funded on either the federal, state or local level. These programs have been funded in many cases as demonstration projects. The programs although devised by individuals from a variety of disciplines have usually been structured predominantly towards program development. For the most part the people who have been involved have been concerned with individual cases in a clinical sense (delivery of service) and not with demonstrating empirically the program's overall effectiveness from a point of view of project accountability. The proposition was presented that what may be advantageous to many funding administrators is either poor or no program evaluation. This paper emphasizes several problems facing those interested in quality day care for all children whether or not they are learning disabled. One parameter discussed concerns the belief that parents can be a vital resource for stating program goals in objective fashion and in assessing the child's behavioral development and current capabilities as related to program objectives. It has become apparent that the parent's input could be used to develop a developmental rating scale (based on observable behaviors of the child) which could be used for the evaluation of the child's progress. In one particular Montessori program this was done, and the results briefly reported. It was pointed out that there are a variety of similar problems facing day care programs and learning disability programs.

Although the United States is preparing for another Day Care boom, and increased funding for the education and care of the learning disabled, those concerned with quality programming for all children underscore the need for adequate policies and standards for defining adequate programming. The basic premise advanced by the authors is that the quality of the current preschool programs vary almost as widely as the number of programs themselves. A great deal of the problem stems from the notion that many of the programs have been initiated at the federal, state or local level with the singular concern being quantity (the number of slots available) rather than with the quality of classroom functioning. Within the growing maze of numbers very little attention is given specifically to the most important aspect of learning--the quality of the programming

in the day care center and the interaction of it with parental expectations and the carrying through of programming in the home. Administrators seem to spend a great deal of time adding and subtracting numbers of children without examination of the type or value of the ongoing programs. Though all programs, regardless of impetus are tangentially related to program administration, few seem to deal directly with what goes on "IN" the center, that is, with the quality of the programs themselves. When will we accept the notion that the quantity of programming should not be the major thrust, but rather it should be the quality of the programs, and that this quality should determine the extent to which day care operations would or should be supported.

One reason that the quality of programming remains underemphasized is because it is more difficult to assess than to simply count the number of people served. The unfortunate fact is that little of what goes on in a preschool center is done because it has been shown to be scientifically effective. The remainder of the paper will attempt to pinpoint several problem areas associated with day care programs, the importance of the parents themselves in the whole process and the description of one particular program where the parents assisted in the development of the program's evaluating procedure.

Examination of five major problem areas is essential to understand why day care is at one of its most important crossroads. First, a brief examination of the definitional problems is undertaken. Second, the importance of the curricular framework in which we work is described. Third, the question "who is in day care?" is asked. Fourth, arguments for the importance of an adequate evaluating component are made and finally, a discussion of the importance of parent input is presented with an example of a program in which parent input was influential is presented.

I. Definitional Problems

According to Child Welfare League Standards (1969), any care that a child receives outside his/her home for some part of the day is day care. Day care centers, as originally conceived, began without a planned educational program. Today, the distinction between day care day nurseries, early education programs and preschool programs is becoming less and less clear. Full day centers obstensibly serve the needs of parents or guardians who are employed or are in employment-related training. In Ohio, for example, the State Welfare Department makes a distinction between what is termed a developmental program as opposed to work related day care. The former seems reserved for children with physical, mental or emotional handicaps. Work-related day care, on the other hand, means the day care services available to children of parents who are working and need a placement for their children while they are at work. The range of programming for work-related day care ranges from custodial to early educational. In addition, part of the problem stems from the fact that all preschool programs are given child care licensing whether it be a part day Montessori program or full day custodial care. At times there seems to be two separate day care camps, (1) those interested in curricular development, and (2) those who concentrate on the reason the child is in the center (namely, whether the parent works or not). Furthermore, the shifting of federal support to work-related day care has given (to some extent) the day care programs the image of being poor people's programs. Finally, many people's image of day care is still one of custodial care and by extension, inferior care.

Westat-Westinghouse (1970) categorized centers into three types according to their sort of programming which is carried out. The first type

of center is the custodial center that places their focus on the safety and "well being" of the child. The second type is classified as an educational center. which has an adequate child care program and has a curriculum at least for part of the day. The third type of center is comprehensive in nature and attempts to provide everything necessary for the total development of the child. The distinction between the first and second type seems more artificial than real. Therefore, there only seem to be two distinct types (1) type 1 and type 2, and (2) type 3.

The most common criteria for categorizing centers is not curriculum based, but on the basis of auspices, that is the type of funding agency and the structure (profit or nonprofit) under which the center falls. This has added to the confusion. In a recent hearing before the finance committee of a midwestern city, contracts were awarded in some cases not on the basis of quality of programming but rather on whether or not certain predetermined community agencies were willing to provide certain sources. It did not matter that some of these agencies did not have any previous experience delivering that service.

There are at least two viable methods for awarding contracts. These two are (1) curriculum based considerations and programming and (2) service or effective caretaking of the child. For the authors programming is the most important criteria, however an argument can be raised for using a service criteria. Local use of federal and state funds seems more often than not to be capricious in that the specific agencies are funded without regard to quality of programming and breadth of service. To add insult to injury continuation funding is not based on evaluation of effectiveness of programming but on political decisions.

As chairman of the Akron Montessori School Corporation, a non-profit corporation formed by concerned parents, this year, for example, our

Montessori program (funded in part by Community Development - Title I) developed an aftercare service so that the children had a Montessori curriculum in the morning and an aftercare program in the afternoon. It should be pointed out that for some reason in some of the local communities many of the educationally oriented preschools do not have an aftercare component and for the most part those that are full day care have less than adequate curriculum. It is important to note that parents sometimes have to make decisions not based on curriculum but on availability, cost, hours, locality and the other children that are there. One interesting question sometimes asked infrequently and used as a deciding factor as to whether or not to enroll a child in a particular program is, "Do you allow children who are sick one day to come to school?" What may happen with parents who work all day is that they cannot place their children elsewhere when sick; some parents then do not wish to send their children to that program. It has also come to our attention that many middle class parents do not wish to send their children to some of the better day care centers because they have "welfare" or "black" children. It is interesting to note that some day care programs which were developed with state or federal funding (serving those children with the greatest need) once they had a sufficient number of private paying parents change their emphasis and shy away from serving those children they originally started out serving. This is not always due to the profit incentive but rather from a wish to avoid the constant hassling with public agencies.

II. Curriculum Framework

The term "curriculum" which Almy (1973) points out originally referred to a course of academic study and has since been more broadly defined to mean classroom experiences, has been replaced by the term "program." Unfortunately, the data on the long-term effect of particular kinds of

curricula has not been as extensive or as definitive as one would be led to believe. Evidence generally indicates that programs designed to produce gains in specific areas show gains in those areas. However, it has not been shown to what extent these gains are sustained. Interest in the relative effectiveness of programs which differ, has led to several attempts to compare them. In line with the variability in curricula programming comes the problem of appropriate credentialing of personnel for these centers. Many curricula are presently determined by fads and some simply by the monies available for hiring staff. The major source of economy in day care centers usually depends on the use of untrained staff. As we in Montessori have discovered this year, you can, with proper budgeting, keep your costs in line with general full day care costs. For the most part, a long-term strategy for building day care alternatives in terms of adequate programming has not evolved.

III. "Who" is in Day Care?

One of the major problems with programming day care centers is the non-continuity of programming. Children do not stay with a single program from year to year. Programs who get their funding from the state, federal or local government usually have a built-in eligibility requirement which works against entry into the program by certain individuals. Furthermore, because of the non-assurance of funding within these programs from year to year, planning becomes extremely difficult. It is sad, but quality programming is not defined the same way by the different agencies involved. The term day care is not used uniformly by state, federal and local governments. Each agency seems to have a need to "turf build" with all its negative effects on programming. As of late, the State Department of Education has finally discovered a place to dump their unemployed elementary education teachers. Also, the federal government supposedly assumed

responsibility for promoting day care plans while the states were to promote legislation for licensing and regulating institutions and agencies that cared for children. The actual establishment and implementation of criteria was supposedly left to the local government. Is it no wonder then that there is such a mess. Everyone is responsible generally, but no one is responsible specifically. Day care has been built on a chaotic framework, attempting to serve a crisis need but with a lack of oversee leadership.

IV. Evaluation Component and Role of Accountability

How day care is to be evaluated is a function of its goals. When day care is tied to welfare policies the major criterion seems to be the number of people served. As long as these are the stated aims (delivery of service regardless of quality) the difficulties of measuring social, emotional and educational changes are avoided. It has become apparent that it is necessary to point out those aspects of the day care environment which are important and how those children in the different day care programs differ from children who do not attend day care. Evaluation puts constraints on administration of funding agencies. From an administrator's point of view you might be better off not having an adequate evaluation done. Administrators would seem to have more political freedom to make decisions where there are no evaluations. For example, if a program is evaluated positively but the funding agency wishes to eliminate the program it becomes more difficult to do just that. If an evaluation comes up poorly but the funding agency wishes to continue its support it can be potentially embarrassing. In the first case where the program is evaluated positively and the agency wishes to cut it off they (the agency) may be required to have a criterion defined priority list. Funding agencies priority lists sometimes seem established by gut feeling. The problem with evaluation

is that it tends to keep people honest and accountable which inadvertently requires more work and a better structure in terms of community input. When one has a well defined hierarchically ordered priority list which can be defended it is possible that the community might question whose bias the list reflects. One way of maintaining power over programs is to keep the decision making criteria private and where they are made public they should be kept vague. Once they are made public and clear one loses a certain amount of control over the appropriation of funds. As subjectivity in funding decreases flexibility to fund pet projects and pet agencies also decreases. Accountability for administrators is personally expensive, especially when one is more interested in maintaining power or status than in serving the needs of the people.

It seems almost ludricous but so often we find that administration within public funding agencies insure that no adequate evaluation is done but when they wish to cut a program they will demand to see the programs evaluation. Thereby using the evaluation concept only as an administrative hatchet tool and for effective programming.

V. Parent Input

In our Montessori program we have emphasized a particular component of the day care area which has not been fully utilized in developing, modifying, and evaluating effectiveness of such programs. This important but often forgotten component is the parent. Parents are usually capable of providing input and assessment recommendations, but have rarely been asked to do so in the past. By actively seeking parent input the possibility that the program will be strengthened (possibly to the point of being able to intervene at other levels, e.g. health care, nutrition checks, counseling, diagnostic services, etc.) is greatly increased. Two such areas which have especially benefitted in this respect are the use of parent input

for goal setting, and more importantly, for program evaluation. An example of the latter will be considered here in our Montessori-type preschool program, parent's input was collected and statements were developed against which observable behaviors could be rated. The questionnaire consisted of approximately one hundred behaviorally oriented statements on which the parents rated their own child's behavior on a five point frequency scale or a five point rating scale. Once these statements were developed and refined, it was a small step to the application of a factor analytic technique to the ratings in order to arrive at eight general categories. The obtained categories were responsibility, socialization, independence, language development, perceptual development, emotionality, perseverence, and impulsivity. These categories, which were derived totally from parent input, have proved quite useful in the assessment and evaluation of at least some aspects of a preschool development program. In addition, a developmental profile was constructed for each child which facilitated the assessment of need areas in both individual children as well as the group. We might add further that one would be hardpressed to determine, without any additional information, if these factors were derived from educational theory, teachers, administration, developmental psychologists, or other child related professionals. Overall, then, it clear that behavioral ratings can be developed on parent input.

The question can be legitimately raised, however, as to whether parent input is or is not important. To answer this question it should be noted that the major reason for adding any particular component to the various phases of a program (be it development, operation, or assessment) is to maximize program effectiveness on the development of the child. The input of the parent into as many phases of the program as possible serves to carry the program goals from the preschool setting into the home. This process is of paramount importance if maximum program effectiveness is to be obtained.

Conclusions

The problems faced by people in day care seems analagous to those problems faced by people working in the area of learning disability (1) definition, (2) funding, (3) defining adequate curriculum, (4) program evaluation, and (5) the use of parent input.

What is important to look at is the process and not the labels.

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